

November 22: Letter to a Daughter

On this day 25 years ago, I sat before a television set with you wriggling in my lap, watching as a group of men struggled to slide a coffin off a plane. It bore the body of the President of the United States. His wife, standing behind the coffin, still wore his blood on her skirt.

During the next 72 hours I must have gone on with all the ordinary chores of living. But in my memory I am always seated on the couch, image after startling image passes before my eyes and the day moves from dawn to dusk without my noticing.

You don't know much about that President of the United States, only what you've learned from books and gossip. In a sense, I don't know much about him, either. The distance between the public and the President is great, and besides there was too little time.

Still, it's fair to say that though he had failures as well as accomplishments, his grace was unflinching. So was his humor. You may think that is a strange quality to praise in a President. Anyone, after all, can tell a joke. But his laughter, some of it at himself, was the kind that lights the dark.

So was his intellect; when he quoted authors like Edith Hamilton you could tell it was from his own reading, not from a ghost writer's quote cards. Some of his quips and epigrams still salt our speech: A rising tide lifts all the boats . . . Washington is a city of Southern efficiency and Northern charm . . . Life is unfair.

It was not on my 21st birthday that I really achieved my majority as a citizen. It was when he spoke of the torch being passed "to a new generation." Like millions, I was enough of an idealist to believe that we were the new brooms that could sweep away the old cruelties and old inertia. Like millions, I was enough of a pragmatist to believe that it would take a cool head and a cool eye to show the way. He had both.

He was quick, too. Those televised news conferences were tennis matches, and how he covered the court! That's something you've never seen — a President who stands out there at the net, again and again returning every ball. If I sometimes thought him mistaken, I never thought him lazy or stupid or careless. Neither did his detractors. We saw him in action; we knew what we had.

On the day 25 years ago when that President of the United States was assassinated, I was not much older than you are now. But already I had known, twice, what it is to vote for a Presidential candidate with a joyful heart. One candidate lost, the other won and both have been tarnished by time. Never mind. I believed then, as I believe now, that they were the best my country had to offer.

Would that President have captured your imagination and your hopes the way he did mine? I can't even guess. But I hope that one day, best of all while you are young, you too will find your own standard-bearer and your own New Frontier.